

**State of the County Address
February 4, 2005**

**Betty Sue Morris
Chair, Board of Clark County Commissioners**

Thank you, Roger, for that kind introduction and thank you to the Chamber of Commerce for hosting today's event, and welcome everyone to the 19th Annual State of the County Luncheon.

A year ago I certainly didn't expect to be speaking to you today. In fact, with an election year facing me I wasn't even positive I'd be here today. But what a difference a year makes, and 2004 was indisputably a difference-making year. A year ago we were facing the Tim Eyman initiative 864 which would have ripped almost \$600 million from our general fund budget. That initiative failed to get the required number of signatures to reach the ballot, though efforts to revive it might surface at a later date.

A year ago we had no idea what kind of a new primary election method we'd be using, or if we'd have a primary in the state at all.

A year ago we feared the Vancouver VA hospital might be closed in a federal belt-tightening effort. Today we're actually under construction on a new Center for Community Health on the VA site and with the Veterans Administration as a partner in the project.

And a year ago, the Board of County Commissioners had three members who had worked together for over five years, and today I'm the only one left!

So here I am, for the second year in a row. My message to you today remains the same as last year - a loud and proud declaration that your county corporate body is financially sound and organizationally sleek. It is peopled by talented and dedicated staff who have met the challenges of our time financially, organizationally, and technologically with a degree of grace rarely seen in government and a willingness - no, an anxiousness - to test their creative mettle against a constrained budget and the ever changing demands of our citizens.

The recipients of the "Our Personal Best" awards today are more than just dedicated employees; they are symbolic of the county family's collective excellence. Because of them, this government body in the last year:

- Has continued the aggressive building program that started several years ago with construction of the public service center and remodeling of the county courthouse. As I speak, the steel skeleton of the new Center for Community Health is clearly visible from I-5 just south of Fourth Plain, as are the finishing touches on our new 112,000-square foot Exhibition Center further north at the Fairgrounds. The Exhibition Center is scheduled to open March first and will house its first event, the Peterson Classic Car Auction, just 2 1/2 weeks later on March 19th. It's a project that promises the county taxpayers a lucrative return on their investment.
- We've balanced our budget and even added enhancements to service delivery in several departments that had gone without for years.

- We have markedly improved our information infrastructure. We've implemented an entirely new web presence, added online building inspection scheduling, and are now working on automated licenses and permits, including systems to accept credit card payments. This will make it much easier for our citizens to do business with us on-line or at the counter.

We've finalized a huge new financial management system that integrates Human Resource Management, Payroll, and Budgeting and we've replaced the Health Department's clinical billing system, so we now get full reimbursements from the state for the medical services we provide on its behalf.

Combined, all these new systems help us support growing service demands without hiring more people.

In December the county, through its participation with the Lower Columbia Fish Recovery Board and the Governor's office, submitted our plan for recovery of listed species of salmon to NOAA Fisheries and we are expecting full approval in the near future. We are the first region in the state to achieve this goal.

- And as the year's grand (and seemingly never ending) finale, our auditor Greg Kimsey and his staff managed a primary and general election with record numbers of new voters, record numbers of provisional voters, and all together the largest number of voters in our county's history. And despite state-wide claims of election fraud, they did it with a degree of excellence and dependability unequalled in the state. Greg Kimsey, if you'll stand I'll join the group in giving you a well earned round of applause.

(Speaking of elections, if you live in the unincorporated segments of the Vancouver Urban Growth Boundary, please remember to return your mail-in ballot for next Tuesday's election on Proposition #1 to fund operation and maintenance of numerous new parks, ball fields and trails. If it's not postmarked by the 8th, your ballot won't get counted, and we all know by now that EVERY SINGLE VOTE MATTERS!)

In preparation for today's remarks I asked the public for their thoughts on what my topics should be, and there were dozens and dozens of responses. They ranged from the future of neighborhood associations in crafting local public policy to the war in Iraq - with lots in between. But the topics most commonly mentioned in writing were the future of the C-Tran bus system and the proposed Cowlitz/Mohegan casino complex at the La Center Junction of I-5.

Most often raised with me in person were questions about the new board: what's the new board like? What's it going to do? How will it be different from the old board? So I'll start with C-Tran and wind up with observations and predictions about the character and agenda of the new board of county commissioners.

As many of you know, all three members of the Board of County Commissioners sit on the C-Tran Board and will be players in future decisions on how the agency's governing body deals with the financial challenges compounded by last November's ballot measure failure. Lament as those who oppose cuts may, there is no way around the tough decision to reduce service if there's no money. If and when that happens, we will make reductions for the greatest efficiency and savings and maintaining the greatest level of service possible.

But before that decision is made, I'm relatively certain the jurisdictions in the county will reach consensus to reduce the service area boundaries and offer the ballot measure once more later in the fall. Which cities are in and which are out are decisions likely to be made by the cities themselves later this month. The future of C-Tran is at the very heart of a successful transportation system in the county, and I think we would all be hard pressed to name a bustling, prosperous metropolitan area in the country that did not have a good public transit system. Good transit is most often a natural ingredient of aggressive, sound economic development.

Just a little over a year ago the former Board of County Commissioners signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Cowlitz tribe spelling out county expectations and tribal obligations if and when the tribe undertook development construction at the La Center Junction. I expect the new board and the tribe will both uphold that agreement despite the Cowlitz partnering with the Mohegan Tribe to build a much larger complex than originally envisioned. And in my personal opinion, the MOU becomes even more important given the expanded plans.

The MOU applies to the land and covers any and all development that happens there, irrespective of its size or tribal business partners.

I want to clarify that the county is not the decision maker on whether or not the development moves ahead. That decision is in the hands of the federal government's Bureau of Indian Affairs, which, as we speak, is diligently and methodically moving through its evaluation procedures. The tribe has requested that the land be taken into trust by the federal government on the tribe's behalf and that has removed the decision making authority of the local jurisdictions.

For its part, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as is required, has requested an Environmental Impact Statement, and the tribe is doing the necessary work to submit it later this year. Once the draft EIS is published, the public will have multiple opportunities to comment on its sufficiency or inadequacies, and then the tribe will have to respond again.

To assist in developing the EIS, the BIA has formed a technical committee to identify development concerns, and the county has a representative at that table who will clearly and eloquently advocate for the county's interests as the process moves ahead.

Additionally, both Commissioners Boldt and Stuart are part of a countywide ad hoc Elected Officials Roundtable, and that roundtable will identify further issues to be addressed in the EIS. There has been much confusion about the terms and applicability of the county's agreement with the Cowlitz.

I'll try to clarify – again, the MOU applies to the land and any development on it, regardless of the size or type of development, and it encumbers all partners of the Cowlitz just as it encumbers the Cowlitz tribe itself. The terms cover three key elements: financial, environmental, and legal.

FINANCIALLY.

The MOU obligates the tribe to pay the equivalent of the property tax that a private sector developer would owe. These revenues will be dispersed in the same way and to the same parties as property tax from a non tribal property owner. The biggest beneficiaries will be the Ridgefield schools, just as they would be with property tax paid by any non tribal land owner.

The MOU further obligates the tribe to collect and remit sales tax for all purchases made by non-Indians, and that will be almost all the patrons. These revenues, too, will be distributed just as any other sales tax collected in unincorporated Clark County.

The MOU requires the tribe to design, build, and pay for any and all improvements to the La Center Junction as deemed important by the Washington State Department of Transportation in order to accommodate the anticipated increases in traffic and forbids any diminished level of service as a result of the development.

The MOU obligates the tribe to pay for any and all law enforcement (sheriff's deputies, prosecutors, court costs) required as a result of the development, both direct and indirect costs. The payments will be adjusted annually depending on the nature and extent of development in the area. the tribe and the Sheriff's office are in negotiations now, and believe you me, that office drives a hard bargain!

It requires the tribe to compensate Fire District 12 for the cost of providing fire services.

It requires the tribe to pay Clark County the equivalent of the hotel/motel tax required of all hotels and motels in unincorporated Clark County.

The tribe will pay 2 percent of its net revenues from gambling for an arts and education fund that could help underwrite applicable activities of schools, nonprofits, and other organizations.

The MOU requires the tribe to contribute \$50,000 annually to a program designated by Clark County to deal with and treat problems associated with compulsive gambling. This amount will be adjusted annually based on inflation.

ON A REGULATORY LEVEL

The MOU requires tribal development to be consistent with all county environmental, development, and building codes. They will pay all fees and charges associated with development review, just as any other applicant would.

There has been a persistent rumor that the tribe will be allowed to run raw sewage into the Lewis River. That is just not true. Another provision of the MOU specifies that no use of any proposed development can be made until the sewage treatment service is completed, inspected, and fully compliant with applicable state and federal standards. The federal Environmental Protection Agency is the body which sets our standards for clean water, and the not even the tribe is exempt from those requirements. Those standards are exactly the same ones as the county complies with when we treat sewage at the Salmon Creek Waste Water treatment plant.

Legally, it's very important to note that the tribe has signed a partial waiver of its sovereign immunity and because of that the MOU can be enforced through the Clark County Superior Court and the courts of the state of Washington should that become necessary.

In short, through this MOU, the tribe has agreed to act like are any other responsible property owner, and the county will hold them to it.

And now to the topic: you all really came today to here about: What's the new board like? What's the new board going to do? And some folks have already started to judge us.

In answer to all those questions and suppositions – Some things I can tell you about us, and some I can't. I can only make predictions. And I can only ask you to delay a bit before you make judgment calls about us. Give us a little time to form up. After all, it's been over a quarter of a century since a Clark County Board of Commissioners underwent such a radical change in membership all at once.

I can tell you that, quite frankly, I like them both a lot, even though we've had very little time to learn much about each other. Steve Stuart brings an abundance of fresh energy, enthusiasm, and new perspective; and Marc Boldt can get to the heart of an issue faster than anyone I ever worked with. He doesn't waste time and I REALLY like that.

The three of us started our team building experience by climbing straight up the steep slope of six consecutive land use appeals and just yesterday finished our seventh with the eighteen notebook plus appendices record on the Stordahl application for the Daybreak Mine near the east fork of the Lewis River. We're learning, I think, that we have more similarities than we have differences, and that in those public policy areas where we have divergent opinions we can debate and at the end of the day still be friends.

They're both just plain old neat people and they bring a rich spectrum of experience to our work to boot. It's a threesome that I believe will coalesce into a strong and forceful unit.

I can tell you with certainty that the new board will be making some technical changes in the way we do our work. For instance, we'll be asking people at public hearing to limit their remarks to 3 minutes, so if you're one of those who are accustomed to lengthy monologues, when in from of a microphone, you might want to brush up on talking tight. And, we will be changing the way we manage land use appeals in terms of timing and deadlines for submission of comments and briefs.

That's all I can tell you about the new board for sure, so here go my crystal ball predictions for you about this board for the coming year:

First, I predict that on economic development, this board will bring unprecedented corporate and personal energy to our collective, countywide efforts at economic development. We won't just encourage Bart Phillips and the CREDC to undertake new prospecting and recruiting efforts, we'll help target the ones we would like to woo and help knock on their door. When potential employers come to see what we have to offer, we'll personally help with the hosting.

This board will not only continue the existing focused public investment strategy to bring required infrastructure to key potential job producing areas, we'll hone and target it to just a few locations with an eye to achieving significant results and those infamous and hard to find "shovel ready sites." And we'll complement those focused public investments by realigning the uses and decision making processes for investments of our economic development REET. There's over \$4 million in that pot to be put to good use.

Because the fly in the ointment of expeditious permitting and making sites shovel ready is environmental management, Commissioner Stuart will personally head up and oversee the long overdue integration and streamlining of our environmental permitting processes so we get a quicker, more certain product. Once done, we and others can move with time certainty to an expeditious decision. And in conjunction with that effort, both Commissioners Stuart and Boldt will be re-assessing our storm water fee program to make sure the taxpayer is getting their money's worth.

I predict that this board will build on last year's success with our railroad. For those of you who don't know, the county has contracted with Columbia Basin Railroad to provide commercial freight service and a dinner train. This contract offers us a tremendous opportunity for economic growth. We'll be able to continue development of the rail corridor, giving us opportunities for job creation, additional property tax base, and reduced numbers of large truck traffic on more rural county roads. And the train will be a boost to our tourism and preserve an historic resource.

I predict this board will continue staunch support for our cities' and ports' economic development goals, and we will continue to participate in discussions on building a new I-5 bridge across the Columbia River and to solving other countywide transportation problems.

BUT – when it comes to light rail – I predict that this board will resist any effort by any jurisdiction in any state to develop or extend light rail to or within Clark County without a full and vocal community debate and citizen vote!

On annexation, I predict this board will continue the past board's support for “balanced annexations” where the annexing jurisdiction takes in not only revenue-producing commercial and industrial lands, but also its fair share of residential areas that require services.

But, as with light rail, I also predict that this board will support only those annexations of highly urbanized areas where there is clear and demonstrated popular support at the polls by property owners and residents alike, particularly in areas where the city does not provide urban services. The people themselves must make the decision to annex or not.

On social services to the handicapped, aging, mentally ill, and drug addicted, I predict the vast legislative experience of Commissioner Boldt will make us a leader in solving both delivery system and financing problems.

I predict this board will maintain a strong commitment to the youth of this community through maintaining our existing programs, and by squarely facing the insidious, invasive problem of methamphetamine production and use. Fighting this drug now consumes almost 50% of the county's criminal justice budget, and exacts a terrible price in terms of school dropouts, mental illness, domestic violence, and other social costs. Your county drug treatment programs have seen a 700% increase in the number of people seeking treatment for this catastrophic drug - a substance which can be cooked on a kitchen stove of ingredients commonly available at your local grocery store or pharmacy. In case you didn't know, methamphetamine eats the human body from the inside out. It erodes teeth, heart muscles, bones, the liver, and brain tissue. Beginning with the first dose, it hastens addiction by destroying the body's natural ability to produce the chemicals that make us feel good. Our youth are at tremendous risk from methamphetamines, and law enforcement cannot possibly launch a successful counter attack alone. The topic inflames my own maternal instinct to protect our young, and I am certain it will take a community-wide effort to stop it.

On taxes, I predict this new board won't pass any!

And on growth (which a large number of you really came to hear about) - I predict that this board will move efficiently and expeditiously to resolve the appeals on last September's growth plan, and this board will do so with new ideas, new vigor, full public transparency and participation, and a new willingness to accept reality about growth and the role the private sector and neighborhoods play in our long term livability. I also predict that the ultimate solutions to quality of life will only be found not by us, but by neighborhoods and developers respecting and working with each other.

I predict in the process this board will respect our cities' jurisdictional planning authority, and reach new levels of creativity in solving our capital financing problems.

I predict that in the process this board will refuse to be trapped in the traditional opposing paradigms of growth versus environmental protection and quality of life, and that it will instead bring the proper balance of a new generation of energy, an old generation of experience, and our collective expertise and political will to the settlement table. In the process, I predict we will reasonably and appropriately add to the UGAs for strong economic development opportunities and a greater variety of realistic residential choices than the plan currently provides. This board will embrace new problem solving techniques and the kind of planning approaches that say: we CAN and WILL do this right and we will deal, as I said earlier, with capital infrastructure.

For my part in the growth debate, most of you already know I've never seen growth as the unwelcome intrusion of newcomers on my otherwise peaceful existence, though many residents seem to. I was a newcomer here myself in the early 70s, and about 60% of the county's population has arrived since then. I guess I could claim they cluttered up my roads as they came.

Today, almost 30% of the people who live here didn't live here 10 years ago but I think they have brought talent and leadership with them, and I welcome them. I don't know whether you realize it or not, but almost 25% of the elected leadership of our seven cities have moved here in those last ten years and since the 1994 Comprehensive Plan was passed. On the Vancouver City Council, only Councilmember Jeanne Stewart has been in the county longer than I have.

I think a lot of really good things have come right along with the inconveniences of growth and I'm pleased about them: our local opportunities for higher education have blossomed. Washington State University is on the edge of launching a four-year program and Clark College is opening new branch campuses. Both are because of growth.

A new state-of-the-art hospital is about to open in the Salmon Creek area and that's because of growth.

We've got great new bookstores, shopping opportunities and restaurants (except on my side of town) because of growth, and we've got a Krispy Kreme, because of growth. And my family's got great new neighbors right across the street, and that's because of growth.

Three members of the Columbian Editorial Board itself (Elizabeth Hovdee, Lou Brancoccio and John Laird) are new in the last decade and I assume they didn't come here because Clark County is known as a backwater area where nothing has changed in 40 years. They came because the area has grown enough to attract the kind of talent they represent, and has an unending number of hot issues just begging to have opinions written about them

The county's budget this year was actually able to meet some of our pent up demands, and that's clearly because of growth.

Because of growth, the Vancouver Symphony has seen its average audience attendance swell from 400 just four years ago to over 1000 today, and I believe the impressive success of the Vancouver Symphony is indicative that this county and the cities within it have passed from the gangly adolescent I saw when I moved here in 1972 into an attractive, graceful young adult, and that transition happened without our really noticing it and in spite of resistance, just as children become young adults without our noticing how, and whether we like it or not.

When we policy makers try to equate growth management with growth control we ignore the direction of state statute; GMA does not give us authority, or even permission, to decide how many new people we want and then take no more. It directs us to forecast how many new people we expect within broad forecast parameters set by the state. And it does not give us permission to plan in five year increments; it directs us to plan for 20.

GMA does not direct us to reach high densities at the expense of everything else. When we hold urban growth boundaries too tight in the name of quality of life, we trade the quality open spaces where we live for open spaces we have to drive to; and when we hold urban growth boundaries too tight in the name of environmental protection we are forced to invade environmentally sensitive areas inside the UGB that should be skipped over entirely. We've seen that happen in the recent past with white oaks!

When we close our eyes and ears to the counsel and involvement of the private sector in trying to solve the challenges of promoting strong job growth, we exclude from our range of options a wealth of collective education, experience, and wisdom - to say nothing of the private sector capital we leave on the table.

Believe me, please, that my remarks do not in any way reflect an intent to throw wide urban growth areas in total disregard of all else; and they do not make light of capital infrastructure costs.

But there are structural issues in capital financing that are not unique to us. They exist across the state and they exist as a product of the history of GMA. As the first round of jurisdictional comprehensive plans were completed in the mid '90s, those jurisdictions reflected a collective shortfall in their capital facilities plans of billions and billions of dollars. They're all still facing the same difficulty today.

When the Legislature first wrote GMA in 1990, and thereafter amended it in 1991 and 1995, (and I know this because I was there) we never linked the planning statutes of Title 36 with the revenue statutes of Title 82. Since then, not only have numerous citizen and legislative actions severely curtailed public financing streams, but the institutional memory of the GMA has almost entirely left the legislature. To the best of my recollection, of those who were there in 1990 and subsequent years, only Helen Sommers remains in the House of Representatives and Mary Margaret Haugen and Tim Sheldon in the Senate.

It also appears that I am one of less than a handful of legislators who served in Olympia during those GMA sessions who remains in public policy at the local level. GMA requires something in infrastructure funding that simply can no longer be accomplished by the public sector alone, and that's the case no matter how large or small your population or urban growth areas. Funding infrastructure now requires new partnerships and new creative thought and when we wring our hands about how unable the public sector is to build infrastructure, we admit, no, invite defeat in solving our problems!

The truth is, existing taxpayers no longer underwrite growth as they did when I was a newcomer. Now, growth subsidizes us. Counties and cities across this state that aren't growing are coming precariously near to closing up shop and going broke. We aren't. And that's because of growth.

The time is here for me to wrap up on this speech and my observations about policies and directions of the new board:

I predict the new board will grow into a strong and cohesive team and go steaming down the tracks to a prosperous future. It will take us a little time to accomplish that, though I suspect it won't take long. In the meantime, I hope you will try your best to refrain from putting us into categories too quickly. If you do, you might get it all wrong. For instance:

If you categorize us by who's the tallest and who's the shortest, then Marc will be in the middle. If you rank us by who's most often on the political left and who's most often on the political right, then I'll be in the middle. But if you categorize by length of tenure on the board, then Steve's in the middle.

So in conclusion I want to invite the two other "middle men" on the Board of County Commissioners to join me here on the stage, and instead of the usual hand-clapping for the speaker, please give your round of applause to your entire new team on the County Board of Commissioners to whom you have entrusted the state of your county.

Thank you!